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## The Woman Elizabeth Bayley Seton, 1793–1803

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## **Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton, the Woman**

### **Introduction**

Who was Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton? The two articles that follow, "The Woman Elizabeth Bayley Seton: 1793-1803," by Sister Marilyn Thie, S.C., and "The Woman Elizabeth Ann Seton: 1804-1812," by Sister Mary Ann Donovan, S.C., address that question. Most published work focuses on Elizabeth Seton as the first American-born saint and/or foundress of the Sisters of Charity in the United States. Interest here goes in another direction. We will bracket, without denying or challenging, her role as saint and foundress to look at her using the category of gender. Who was Elizabeth Bayley, then Seton, as a woman? What do we learn about her when we examine her as a woman in her time, her world?

The image of an hourglass connects these two articles. Beginning at the wide top opening, the first article places Elizabeth within the context of her world, amidst life in late eighteenth century New York City as experienced by women of her class, race, and age. This article culminates at the smallest part of the hourglass with Elizabeth's personal experience. The second article explores her personal experience as widow and as mother of a teenaged daughter, in the conviction that understanding this dimension of Elizabeth's life will lead outward to the broader experience of many women, then and now.

## **The Woman Elizabeth Bayley Seton: 1793-1803**

BY

MARILYN THIE, S.C.

### **1. The Springtime of Elizabeth's Life: 1793-1798**

These years may well be the happiest in Elizabeth Bayley Seton's life. Beginning sometime in 1793 as she is courting William Magee Seton, they extend through 1798. Several events in that latter year precipitate the dramatic changes in Elizabeth and William's lives: the unexpected death of William's father at fifty-two, the difficult birth of

their third child Richard (jeopardizing the lives of mother and infant), their assuming responsibility for Will's younger half siblings, more serious warning signals about his health, and the impending failure of his business. Only a few years into her marriage, Elizabeth contrasts "the lively animated Betsy Bayley" with "the softened matron with traces of care and anxiety on her brow."<sup>1</sup> Our focus precedes these events and their burdens; we look at a period that was, in effect, the springtime in Elizabeth's life. That these were special years Elizabeth herself acknowledged in a letter to Julia Sitgreaves Scott on 9 July 1798. "Could I have expected a life of such happiness as I have known these four years past?"<sup>2</sup>

These years celebrate her courtship and marriage. By marrying someone with William Magee's social and economic status, Elizabeth becomes a lady, a young matron, with corresponding responsibilities: mistress of a house with servants/slaves to supervise, benevolent activity, social responsibilities related to her husband's business and social position, duties peculiar to women for family well-being and religious practice, with its moral and church dimensions. With her marriage, she enters the large Seton family with its two sets of siblings after years of alienation from her own half brothers and sisters. As she assumes the responsibilities of marriage, Elizabeth is a rather young nineteen years and two months, educated (at least for some time) in ways appropriate to a potential genteel Lady but without the benefits of boarding schools or travel.<sup>3</sup>

Within months of her marriage Elizabeth faces her first pregnancy, confinement, and nursing an infant. Despite the challenges, Elizabeth never forgets the excitement her younger self felt at having "my own home at 20—the world—that and heaven too, quite impossible!"<sup>4</sup> This is the Elizabeth so many of us find easy to embrace: happiness dominates—not joy which only maturity, wisdom, and

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Bayley Seton (hereafter EBS) to Julia Sitgreaves Scott (hereafter Julia), 3 June 1798, in *Letters of Mother Seton to Mrs. Julianna Scott*, ed. Joseph B. Code, (New York: 1960), 25. I am grateful to Elizabeth McLaughlin, S.C., archivist, and her able staff at the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth Archives for the many ways they provided generous assistance.

<sup>2</sup>EBS to Julia, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 28.

<sup>3</sup>As a young woman, Elizabeth longed for the opportunity to travel, as she recalls in a letter to Eliza Sadler (hereinafter Sad), then in France. "I almost envy you the view of so fine a country and your description of the people awakens what formerly was a reigning passion in my breast, a curiosity to see the world and Europeans in particular" (EBS to Sad, 8 February 1796, Archives of Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth of New Jersey [hereafter SEA], book 17, no. 1).

<sup>4</sup>EBS, "Dear Remembrances," in *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings*, ed. Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville (New York: 1987), 346.

suffering survived can bring—but happiness grounded largely in peace, tranquility, and a sense of wholeness; a happiness which suggests that she has, at least at this moment, reached a long-sought equilibrium that balances earlier periods of melancholy and despair.<sup>5</sup>

To understand Elizabeth as a woman of her time, it is necessary to have a concrete sense of the world in which she lived, the context that shaped the parameters of her life. In multiple ways, she exemplifies the experience of upper-class white women who lived in New York City in the richly varied, turbulent period of transition between the colonial and republican eras. Her early married years coincided with the city's growth from a muddy, stench-filled provincial town into the young nation's premier port and mercantile center, a phenomenon which accelerated further disparity between the wealthy and impoverished. The latter included increasing numbers of slaves and escaped or newly freed blacks, sick immigrants, widows or women for other reasons on their own, or, more likely, often with children, sailors, and prostitutes, some abandoned by the British.<sup>6</sup> To what degree Elizabeth takes note of social contradictions and reads them as such is questionable; the upper-class consciousness she formed while young is likely the one she lives with throughout her life. In effect, this mind set enables her to note the misery of others, even be moved by it, but recognize neither the structural injustices that perpetuate the disparities nor the prevalent ideologies which justify glaring inequities of class, race, and gender.

It is this context that shapes Elizabeth's daily life. To illustrate several ways in which Elizabeth was a woman of her time, I mine two kinds of sources: primary writings by Elizabeth and her contemporaries, and secondary sources from recent feminist scholarship. Reading Elizabeth in the light shed by the lived experience of women who were her contemporaries, rather than in abstract isolation from her

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<sup>5</sup>Elizabeth's memory of difficult periods in her youth, recorded in "Dear Remembrances," is supported by a letter from her sister years after the experiences in which Mary recalls "very very painful events" from their youth (Mary Post to EBS, 1 August 1808, cited in Annabelle M. Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: 1774-1821* [New York: c. 1951, reprints 1976, 1985], 38; also in Ellin Kelly, *Numerous Choirs: A Chronicle of Elizabeth Bayley Seton and Her Spiritual Daughters*, 1: *The Seton Years, 1774-1821* [Evansville, Indiana: 1981], 31-32).

<sup>6</sup>Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: 1986), 5. An enterprising British agent collected 3000 impoverished women from the slums of Liverpool and shipped them over to serve as prostitutes for the British troops under General Howe in New York City. After the war some citizens drove out about 1000 left behind by the British soldiers. The others, and many who returned after being expelled, joined other destitute women as part of the "Vagrants."

world, reveals more commonalities than differences. She comes alive as a woman whose pleasures and sorrows are familiar to women whose lives parallel hers, especially in race and class.

The following discussion is like a series of photographs, grouped around specific aspects of the daily life of women in New York City at the end of the eighteenth century. Although Elizabeth is the central subject for each topic, her reality will be placed alongside that of her contemporaries, mainly her peers but also some whose race and/or class shape their lives in patterns very different from hers. Specific questions structure our discussion: what forms of entertainment did Elizabeth enjoy, first as Betsy Bayley and then as Betsy/Eliza Seton? To what extent did she dress in accord with contemporary fashion? What was the quality of her personal relationships, especially with her husband and closest woman friend? How did she experience—and feel about—pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, mothering? What did it mean for a woman of her race and class to run a household? What forms of benevolent activity did she engage in, as a wealthy and socially responsible matron? How was her life affected by the epidemics of yellow fever, the pervasiveness of tuberculosis, the high maternal and infant/child mortality rates, the growing disparity between wealth and poverty? What brought her delight, enjoyment; what expanded her soul and nourished her spirit?

### Entertainments and Fashion

Contemporary data about Betsy Bayley is disappointingly scarce, but there are enough clues to support the hypothesis that she enjoyed many of the entertainments, social and individual, available to women of her age, race, and socio-economic class. Much that Elizabeth writes in later years likely distorts her earlier enthusiasm for certain activities. She recollects her younger self through the lens of a narrower spirituality, one more negative toward social events and certain forms of entertainment.<sup>7</sup> There are, however, clues from her various writings that give us an image of Betsy Bayley, then Seton, enjoying herself in leisure activities.

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<sup>7</sup>The clearest expression of these attitudes is found in the *Red Advice Book to Josephine* (Catherine), written about 1818 as her only surviving daughter traveled north to visit Julia Scott in Philadelphia and then to New York to see relatives and friends of her parents. The book, preserved in the Archives of Saint Joseph's Motherhouse in Emmitsburg, Maryland, was available through Xerox copies of the original at SEA. Even "Dear Remembrances" skims over these years (Kelly, *Elizabeth Seton*, 344-353).

There emerge pictures of Betsy Bayley/Seton horseback riding, dancing resplendent in ball gowns, attending the theater well into the first years of her marriage, wearing fashionable hair styles and clothes, reading selected novels, and spending evenings at dinners and social events hosted by family and friends. Her notes to William Magee during their courtship as well as occasional comments to Julia Sitgreaves Scott and Eliza Craig Sadler (Sad), close friends and faithful correspondents throughout Elizabeth's life, suggest by content and tone a spirited, charming, confident young woman, a sharp contrast to the late adolescent remembered by a mature Mother Seton as being "very miserable" at eighteen.<sup>8</sup> The persistent undercurrent of sadness, melancholy, and despair surfaces periodically, even at the happiest, most fulfilling moments of her life, but the little evidence we have about these years suggests this was not her dominant orientation during courtship and early marriage.

Elizabeth's memory of a conversation with Julia while horseback riding supports this conclusion. "Do you remember the day we rode as far as Hornbrooks on the East River? When we had ascended the hill and were viewing the delightful scenery in every direction, I told you that this world would always be good enough for me that I could willingly consent to be here forever."<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth as a young woman tended toward the same impulsiveness about which she later cautions her daughter, Catherine. Acknowledging that she speaks from her own experience, Elizabeth warns her "Kit," especially when interacting with men, to "mind your *first impressions*, my darling, and resist them until you can examine a little what may be their consequences," adding "after a strong first attraction, passions will soon blind poor reason."<sup>10</sup> A few pages later Elizabeth returns to this theme, extending it to socializing with women as well as men. "Think when you are strongly struck by man or woman, of the rich golden apples said to grow on the banks of the Euphrates which when grasped turn to powder and dust. [Many] such an apple my poor dear one will meet and many such your poor Betsy B. and Betsy S. too has had to swallow

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<sup>8</sup>"Dear Remembrances," in Kelly, *Elizabeth Seton*, 346.

<sup>9</sup>EBS to Julia, 9 May 1798, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 20. This passage is immediately followed by one that indicates that the negative undercurrent was well to the fore in May 1798, reflecting the shift that took place in her life's events and her fundamental orientation within a few years. "But now Julia, since that short space of time, so thoroughly is my mind changed that nothing in this world, were all its best pleasures combined, would not tempt me to be otherwise than what I am—a passenger." *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Red Advice Book*, 5-6. Emphasis in original.

at the risk of choking because she could not retract."<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth makes her warning to Catherine a more explicit personal recrimination. "If I had life to go again with my 40 years experience I would avoid singularity in everything but one, and that one is, *I would be kind to everybody* but admit few *within* my heart."<sup>12</sup> Whether this speaks only about early infatuations or also extends to the loving relations she shared with many, particularly women friends, or simply reflects the heartache suffered from the loss of so many loved ones is not clear.

The forms of entertainment that attracted Betsy Bayley and the newly wed Elizabeth Seton coincide with those popular with most upper-class women and men. Elizabeth's dancing shoes, preserved to this day, indicate a mode of socializing the more scrupulous, ascetic Mother Seton did not deny to Catherine. The memories evoked in her advice, in spite of Mother Seton's attempt to conceal them beneath caveats and cautions, suggest that Betsy liked dancing, not simply as a "good exercise . . . preferable to private chit chat . . . if you must be in company," but because it was fun, enjoyable. Mother Seton does, however, add a proviso, voicing a central preoccupation in the *Advice Book*: "if you can do so [enjoy dancing] without its becoming a passion."<sup>13</sup> She continues on a more encouraging note, "I never found any effect from it . . . but the most innocent cheerfulness both in public and private."<sup>14</sup>

Somewhat at odds with her encouragement to Catherine always to dress simply and neatly even if poor,<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth admits her own early fascination with ball gowns, noting her "vexation at the time it took to prepare dresses for balls."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, she confesses to being distracted after dancing, "unable to say my prayers seeing always my partners instead of my God," an admission mirroring the experience of many young women, then and since.<sup>17</sup> Although urging Catherine to read Francis de Sales on "dance and play," she herself "cannot

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 12-13. Emphasis in original.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 20, 21.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>15</sup>The full text reads, "in your *dress* mind that particularly—nothing is so easy as to forget it, on the pretext of doing *as others do*, but be sure that simplicity should be your only rule. [I]t makes a lovely woman more lovely, and even an ugly one pleasing and *neat neat* if ever so poor" (ibid., 14-15). Emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

remember the least of indecency or pride in dress, or the smallest familiarity or impropriety in dancing."<sup>18</sup>

The tone Elizabeth takes with Catherine likely belies the extent to which she herself, at Catherine's age, was very much concerned with styles currently in vogue. The surviving engravings and miniatures leave no doubt that she dressed and coiffed her hair according to the dictates of contemporary fashion. Nothing makes this point more dramatically than the hair style she wore for the 1796 portrait by the fashionable French immigrant artist Fevret de Saint-Mémin. One long side-curl lies prominently on one side of her neck, a style so fashionable that it prompted praise in the *New-York Weekly Museum*, 13 June 1789. "The side curl on the neck of beauty will again wanton with its usual pride; several ladies of the TON [*sic*] having appeared with that graceful disposition of the hair: this we hope will be generally adopted; for a little flowing lock on a pretty neck, gives it increased beauty; and is still more necessary to conceal the neck possessed of inferior charms."<sup>19</sup>

While the older Elizabeth encourages dancing as appropriate recreation, she is just as firm about the impropriety of attending theatrical productions. She cites two reasons: first, plays arouse passions best left undisturbed—once again raising the danger of arousing passions in young women, a theme which pervades not only her *Advice Book* but also contemporary prohibitions against romantic novels; second, by attending plays one thereby financially supports the reprehensible life style of actors.<sup>20</sup> More interesting for our purpose is Elizabeth's memory of the theater's effect on her. "[T]he best and wisest men who ever lived have thought the theatre a place of danger for young and old. [W]hy should you or I put our conduct and opinion in opposition to theirs. [N]ot I indeed who turn with abhorrence only at a remembrance of the effect the frequentation of the theatre had on my passions, and the extravagant ideas I imbibed in it, although I was never carried there by a delight in the amusement but only to see some favorite object I should not see any where else."<sup>21</sup>

What these "favorite objects" were she leaves to Catherine's, and our, imaginations. It is in this context that Elizabeth makes the often

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Cited in Rita Susswein Gottesman, *The Arts and Crafts in New York: 1777-1799: Advertisements and News Items from New York City Newspapers* (New York: 1954), 81: 329.

<sup>20</sup>*Red Advice Book*, 16-18.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 15-17.



quoted negative comment about her younger self, a poignant lament that only whets a desire to know more about her early years. "[P]oor poor Betsy B. had no mother, nor even principles to keep her from folly." She then adds to Catherine, "how different will your judgment be."<sup>22</sup>

Elizabeth was not alone in her criticism of the theater but clearly out of sync with others of her class at the time she expresses her views to Catherine. Earlier many of her peers in New York opposed plays on moral grounds, arguing then much the way she does years later.<sup>23</sup> The few who persisted in condemning theatrical performances shared her arguments: it corrupts the moral sensibilities of those both attending and performing while wasting money. Overall the theater was well supported by upper-class society particularly after the Revolutionary War. In fact, during the British occupation of the city (1776-1783), plays were among the most popular entertainment for British officers and their Loyalist supporters, largely in the upper-class.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, even as late as 1798, the mayor was receiving strong letters requesting him to discourage attendance at theaters for these were "Corrupting the Morals and manners of the People."<sup>25</sup>

The most controversial interest Elizabeth enjoyed in these years was her fascination with Rousseau's *Emile*, likely given to her by Sad upon the latter's return from France.<sup>26</sup> While many biographers condemn and/or explain away her enthusiasm for this book, none try to

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 17. Besides the advice Elizabeth gives Catherine about the theater, the most explicit extant evidence that she attended plays herself is in a letter to Julia (EBS to Julia, 23 April 1798, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 17).

<sup>23</sup>At their meeting of 14 October 1785, the Common Council of the City of New York ordered a commissioner of the almshouse to return a donation to a theatrical group. Although technically this is because the group failed to obtain a license to perform, the Council emphasizes a different point.

Resolved that, while so great a Part of this City still lies in Ruins and many of the Citizens continue to be pressed with the Distresses brought on them in consequence of the late War, there is a loud Call to Industry and Economy: And it would in a peculiar Manner be unjustifiable [*sic*] in this Corporation to countenance enticing and expensive Amusements. That among these a Play House [theater] however regulated must be numbered, while under no Restraint it may prove a fruitful Source [*sic*] of Dissipation Immorality and Vice. (*Minutes of the Common council of the City of New York 1784-1831*, 1: 178-79.) Hereinafter cited as MCCCNY.

<sup>24</sup>*The Citizens Directory and Strangers Guide Through the City of New York* (New York: 1814), 29.

<sup>25</sup>John Murray, Jr. signed his letter "A Friend to Mankind." Cited in Sidney I. Pomerantz, *New York, An American City 1783-1803: A Study of Urban Life* (New York: 1938), 475.

<sup>26</sup>Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education* (1762), trans. Allan Bloom (New York: 1979).

ascertain her attraction to it by examining the text itself.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the normally even-keeled Elizabeth responds passionately to this book, reminiscent of her earlier, exuberant self. She exudes to Sad, "Every half hour I can catch goes to Emilius—three Vol: I have read with delight and were I to express half my thoughts about it, particularly respecting his Religious ideas, I should lose that circumspection I have so long limited myself to and be *E.A.B.*, instead of *E.A.S.* Dear J.J., I am yours—and my Sad, you have your share of *E.A.S.*"<sup>28</sup> Her enthusiasm is as strong although more sober in a subsequent letter. "Your JJ has awakened many ideas which have long been at rest. Indeed he is the writer, I shall always refer to in a season of sorrow for he makes me forget myself whilst reading, but leaves the most consoling impression on every thought. I hope we shall often enjoy his society together."<sup>29</sup>

Most drawn to his ideas on religion, she likely appreciates his efforts to use reason to discover what can be known about the meaning of life and God "naturally," that is, promoting a "natural religion" reached by bracketing, or abstracting from, "revealed religion."<sup>30</sup> This includes devising a morality from the senses, conscience, and judgment.<sup>31</sup> Reading this central section of *Emile*, Rousseau's treatise on the education of a young man,<sup>32</sup> through the lens Elizabeth provides in her letters, one notices the emphasis on "reason," a notion similar to her own insistence that "reason" is a guide through difficult times.<sup>33</sup>

A fascinating sidelight on her enthusiasm for Rousseau comes from her older and, in many ways, stodgier self. Perhaps she exaggerates when she "confesses" her embarrassment that at one point in her life she read Rousseau, presumably *Emile*, for her Sunday devotions/

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<sup>27</sup>See Melville, *Seton*, 63-65. She notes Simon Bruté's condemnation on p. 63: "Never let go that poor Mother [Seton was] perverted to Rousseau and Emilius by her unhappy friend Mrs. Sadler." See also Joseph I. Dirvin, C. M., *Mrs. Seton, Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* (New York: 1962, reprint 1975), 85-87, who refers to Rousseau as "dangerous."

<sup>28</sup>EBS to Sad, n. d; likely 1799, SEA book 17, no. 18. Emphasis in original.

<sup>29</sup>EBS to Sad, 1799, SEA book 17, no. 19.

<sup>30</sup>*Emile*, 295-96.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>32</sup>The education Rousseau discusses for young men differs radically from that he suggests for "Sophie," the epitome of young women whose purpose, and so appropriate education, is to be of service to men.

<sup>33</sup>A letter to Julia Scott contains an example. "To resign our dearest hopes, and console ourselves with Reason in the hours when anguish rends the heart, to rouse from the torpor of grief and enter into scenes in which the heart has no concern, or at least can receive no comfort, is the lot of virtue, and superior minds" (9 May 1790, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 19).

reading. Her reaction is best understood in social context. Civil law, created and enforced by the New York City Common Council, required citizens to devote Sunday only to pious exercises and devotional reading. Without this data, it is tempting to read her embarrassment simply as testimony to her piety. If, however, she did read Rousseau on Sundays, no matter what the religious implications, she was clearly breaking the civil law. In this context, the Rousseau-infatuated Elizabeth appears more a free spirit instead of a pious, even scrupulous, young woman.<sup>34</sup>

Elizabeth's attraction to *Emile* coincides with its popularity among literate upper class women at the end of the eighteenth century. Recent research discloses that women more than men found this book enormously important.<sup>35</sup> *Emile* received a quite different reception compared to Rousseau's *Nouvelle Heloise*. In this romance the heroine Julie not only successfully maintains simultaneous relations with a male lover and her husband but, most scandalous to many, survives unpunished herself, thereby violating all social norms.<sup>36</sup> Although popular, this book was attacked for fostering, and condoning, "passionate behavior" and active sexuality among women, here extramarital.<sup>37</sup> Most of Elizabeth's contemporaries seem to have shared her attraction to *Emile* while also condemning *Heloise* and other romances that might arouse women's passions.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Numerous meetings of the Common Council of the City of New York dealt with violations of the issue of Sunday observance. Some examples: 14 September 1795, a group of citizens formed a society for the "purpose of aiding and assisting the Magistrates in the due execution of the Law against the profanation of the Lords day," an offer the Board found "highly Laudable and praise-worthy" (MCCCN 3: 178); 15 April 1804, two adults petitioned to have a fine removed which had been imposed on them because "their children were playing in the Streets on a Sunday," (3: 495); 23 March 1812, a memorial regarding aspects of the Sunday observance was issued (7: 82-83).

<sup>35</sup>Deism was fashionable among the educated upper class in New York City at this time, as were the writings of Thomas Paine. See Melville, *Seton*, 63.

<sup>36</sup>Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: 1980), 23-27; 241-43. See her description of reading habits of upper-class women in the period after the Revolution, 235-64; contemporary proscriptions, especially geared to women, against reading novels, 239-41.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 241-45.

<sup>38</sup>It may simply be coincidence that some of the attitudes Elizabeth expressed as Mother Seton, in advice she gave her daughters and pupils, resemble Rousseau's in *Emile*. I suspect, however, that his influence reappears in many of her later opinions, from reading romances to rejecting time spent making fashionable clothes and attending balls. (See, for example, *Emile*, Book 4, 348.) Further exploration of Rousseau's views as appropriate educational methods and her own seems well worth pursuing.

## Personal Relationships

These springtime years were marked by the physical presence of people who contributed most to Elizabeth's happiness—her father, husband, father-in-law, their first children, her sister—and the explicit reassurance that Elizabeth had a special place in the affections of Eliza Sadler, the woman friend whose love and respect seems most significant at this time.

Presumably these relations, like those with William's half sisters, Rebecca and Cecilia, Julia Scott, and Catherine Duplex (Dué), were first formed and nourished through frequent personal contact and the shared intimacies physical presence encourages. Our acquaintance with these friendships is only at the interstices, through letters sent between times of presence. This gives us, at best, glimpses, accounts from Elizabeth that she inevitably casts for the one absent.

Letter writing throughout her adult life created networks, knitting Elizabeth into the fabric of the daily lives of close friends and family. Separated physically for most of her life from many most dear to her and those upon whom she relied for guidance, Elizabeth refined letter writing to an art, avocation, ministry. Moreover, writing brief notes across town to suitor, husband, friends, family to make arrangements, remind, tease, express concern and love was then what telephoning is for us. Easily affectionate, presumably in actuality as in writing, she speaks often of embracing friends, her children, her father. In these springtime years, Elizabeth's letters reflect a variety of emotions and, perhaps more than any other source, show us her humor and playfulness; the charming attractiveness of her personality; her need to express and receive affection; her desire to be loved, to be special to the woman friend she loves deeply; her self-confidence with Will's affection. In addition to what we learn about Elizabeth, the specific language of these letters tells us as much about customs/mores of the period as does the content.<sup>39</sup> The two relationships most nourishing of this springtime are with her husband and Eliza Sadler.

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<sup>39</sup>John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: 1988), 42-44.

The warm, loving, light exchanges between Elizabeth and William in their first years together, in courting but especially after marriage, reveal their delight in each other. In notes she penned during their courtship, Elizabeth is self-confident and directive, sure about where she stands with him and her attractiveness, even when this is marred by an eye problem. "Your Eliza's eye is very ugly, but not very painful, but it will prevent the possibility of my going out, therefore you must devote a great deal of your time to me—come as early as possible."<sup>40</sup> While courting, she writes frequent notes to him. After marriage, they seem to be apart a good deal: when he visits relatives, is away on business, for his health, or social events from which Elizabeth absents herself. During summers when she and the children are outside the city and the year the whole family lives with her father, she frequently sends William notes. They reflect both a daily intimacy and deep longing, together hallmarks of a vibrant, vital love. "My love, I send your clothes brush and comb, which I forgot this morning. . . . Is it possible that I am not to see you again for so long a time. Heaven Protect you, and return you again in safety. Your darlings . . . cannot understand that Papa is not to come nor tomorrow—nor next day nor the day after—that is for their Mother to feel. . . . Dear Dear William farewell."<sup>41</sup>

William's to her, particularly in the first year of marriage, use the conventional paternal language common then, underscoring the wife's position vis-à-vis her husband, who becomes a father-figure as the older, wiser, mentor-husband.<sup>42</sup> He explains his preference for writing to her rather than attending church devotions: "my little girl's dear William" enjoys "conversing with my darling little wife." He conducts a dialogue with Elizabeth's picture, his consolation while away, fantasizing it "beckoning me to return." While he can only imagine Elizabeth experiencing "anxiety and regret" at his absence, in the picture she "looks gay." He continues, "Oh! that tomorrow was come, that might bring me nearer to that little heart, which I'm sure must

<sup>40</sup>EBS to William Magee Seton (hereinafter WMS), n. d., SEA book 27, no. 67a.

<sup>41</sup>EBS to WMS, n. d., SEA, book 27, no. 69.

<sup>42</sup>Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: 1980), 62.

beat to receive its Master."<sup>43</sup> While not all his letters reflect the daughter-child-wife theme this explicitly, one almost two years later laments that only the absence of "my dear little Owny bony" puts a damper on the trip.<sup>44</sup> Others from this period are loving but simpler in expression: "My dearest love," "Adieu my darling."<sup>45</sup>

The "little girl" he addresses matures quickly, becoming friend and companion as the "girl" becomes a mother and all too soon a business associate and peer.<sup>46</sup> This pattern, of a wife moving in her husband's eyes from "little girl" to "friend" is not unique to Elizabeth and William, even though their particular circumstances of inheriting responsibility for his younger siblings is a factor, as is his failing business and his subsequent need of her assistance.

The ideal of a companionate marriage was emerging in this era. Selecting a marriage partner among the upper classes placed less emphasis on property, wealth, or social status and, while not negating these, more on mutual attraction and likely companionship.<sup>47</sup> The model of "friendship," seeing one's partner fundamentally as friend, was at the heart of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Published in England in 1798, it quickly found an avid audience as well as vociferous opponents in the new country. Shaping her argument to persuade parliament and, in general, an all-male and mostly upper-class audience who alone held the power to change women's status, Wollstonecraft insisted that a wife and mother—if educated as rational and virtuous, and assured rights as a citizen—would not only benefit society at large by morally educating her children but also be an informed, interesting wife, a friend rather than a vain ornament.<sup>48</sup> In the United States some prescriptive literature, while advocating friendship as the model for marriage, burdened women more than men. It exhorted women to be exclusively male-

<sup>43</sup>WMS to EBS, from Philadelphia, 27 July 1794, Xerox from the Archives of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill (hereinafter SHA); from transcript only, no archival data.

<sup>44</sup>WMS to EBS, 15 May 1796, SHA, nn. 325, 326, 327, 328.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.; WMS to EBS, 26 July 1794, SHA, nn. 187, 188, 189, 190.

<sup>46</sup>EBS to Julia, 18 March 1800, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 71-72.

<sup>47</sup>This is brought out by Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York: 1984), 86; and Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 229-35, 238.

<sup>48</sup>Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* was simultaneously enormously popular and ridiculed in the United States. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (New York: 1967), for example, 276-79, 283-87. See also Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Mother," in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, ed. Linda K. Kerber and Jan Sherron De Hart, 3rd. ed. (New York: 1991), 90-92.

centered in their relationships by insisting that their husband should be their only real friend.<sup>49</sup>

The time in which William and Elizabeth are loving and expressing their love in writing is in many ways a "between" time. The early colonial conventions of arranged marriages characterized by formality and politeness, whereby one's husband is "Mr." and she "Mrs.," had broken down, while the equally rigid but quite different Victorian prescriptions, largely separating men and women into public and private worlds with little real companionship and friendship, had not yet emerged.<sup>50</sup> The perennial concern with a wife's virginity at marriage and subsequent fidelity was still prominent, a concern rooted largely in property rights and inheritance no matter how it was dressed.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, women were more active sexually; marriages after conception increased due, some argued, to the popularity of romances and the theater. Supposedly, by stirring their passions these genres encouraged women to act upon their feelings.<sup>52</sup> Coinciding with women's increased sexual activity, the popular ideal of women's beauty now included dimensions of sexual appeal.<sup>53</sup> William and Elizabeth seem to have reaped the benefits of loving at a time when they internalized neither set of extreme conventions, colonial or Victorian. The warmth, affection, and love they freely express make believable their deepening attachment. Not all contemporary marriages fared this well.

Influenced by the recently crafted Declaration of Independence and Constitution, the general ethos encouraged many heretofore excluded to envision "the pursuit of happiness" and "liberty" as fundamental to their personal well-being. As a result, more women sought ways to extricate themselves from brutal or otherwise unhappy marriages. The existing legal restrictions forbidding women to initiate divorce, the denial of marital rape, and the tradition of corporal pun-

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<sup>49</sup>See Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 338, n. 92, where she cites "Essay on Friendship, Addressed to the Ladies," *Massachusetts Magazine* 6 (November 1794):683-87.

<sup>50</sup>Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 61.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 55-60. Norton calls concerns with women's virtue (that is, virginity) "protective social mechanisms designed to prevent them from making a mistake in the choice of a husband," given the lack of options for ending an unhappy marriage (*ibid.*, 51). See also Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, on divorce, 167-69. There are similar explanations in D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 44-45.

<sup>52</sup>D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 41, 43; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 245; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 234.

<sup>53</sup>D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 42-43.

ishment of wives, plus the economic difficulties for women on their own, limited their options.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the phenomenon of "run-away wives,"<sup>55</sup> adultery,<sup>56</sup> announcements of marital separations in newspapers,<sup>57</sup> and the number of women with small children abandoned by men underscore that many women faced problems in and out of marriage.

Such situations were not uncommon. Eliza Seton Maitland, William's sister, is a case in point. After her husband "was put in the limits," William assumes responsibility for her and their children, providing food and fuel even though he is strapped financially.<sup>58</sup> Such situations were far from unusual. Indeed, Elizabeth's brother-in-law, Wright Post, consistently provides both financial and moral support as well as a home when she is widowed and without income. Many women, of course, were without such resources. Economic pressures, combined with strong social expectations that women will be married, make it surprising that a significant number tried to avoid a second marriage. This pattern was not as common for men, as is evident with both Elizabeth's and William's fathers who sired, with different wives, two separate—but numerous—families. By contrast, statistical and personal evidence supports the conclusion that for many women, one marriage was (more than) enough.

Given the strength of Elizabeth and William's relationship, it is something of a surprise to hear her speak negatively to Julia about a second marriage. (I am presuming, of course, that she is serious.) In the context of concern about Julia's being unprotected during a recent fire in her neighborhood, Elizabeth suggests that might be reason enough to "form an engagement." Then she continues, "Tho' independent of that, were I you, nothing on earth should tempt me. For new schemes of Life are not the thing except we could be more certain of the future, and the very best of these men (one is writing opposite to me) are so unruly and perplexing that nothing should induce a rea-

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<sup>54</sup>Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 47-50; D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 48. Kerber, *Women of the Republic* cites data for New York, 159; 162 n. 7, 183; 160-73.

<sup>55</sup>Jan Kurth, "Wayward Wenches and Wives: Runaway Women in the Hudson Valley, N. Y., 1785-1830," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 1 (Winter, 1989):199-220.

<sup>56</sup>Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 163, 166-67.

<sup>57</sup>The following example appeared as an announcement in the *New-York Packet*. 11 July 1785: "Jacob Wichon, of this city, ship wright . . . determined to live separate from his wife" (Gottesman, *Arts and Crafts*, 81: 211, #693).

<sup>58</sup>EBS to Julia, 1 February 1802, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 100. This is the same Eliza Maitland who cared for two of Elizabeth and William's children while Elizabeth recovered from the birth of Dick (EBS to Julia, 20 August 1798, *ibid.*, 29).



sonable woman to wear the chains of two of them, and that's the plain English of Matrimony."<sup>59</sup>

The end of a long day? An aberration? An honest assessment of how marriage in late eighteenth century, even a good one, feels to an independent woman, with friends and interests of her own? How should we read this?

*Eliza Sadler. Elizabeth's Dear Friend*

In addition to what Elizabeth's letters disclose about customs between husband and wife, the specific language she uses in writing to close women friends reveals dimensions of the deep love and explicit affection she seeks with women. Here too Elizabeth's behavior coincides with contemporary mores. Women commonly used overtly romantic language to express warmth and affection for dearly loved women friends; for many, this was less true in exchanges with their husbands, particularly in the nineteenth century.<sup>60</sup> In using openly loving, romantic language when writing close women friends, Elizabeth is not unusual, nor are those responding to her in kind. Even more to the point, there is little reason to assume that graphic physical expressions of tenderness are simply literary devices which will not be carried out physically. On the contrary, it is more realistic to expect that the caresses and embraces longingly spoken of in letters will be exchanged physically upon meeting.

During this springtime, Eliza Craig Sadler ("Sad") is the recipient of Elizabeth's most explicit expressions of affection. Indeed, Elizabeth is frank that Sad's love for her and physical presence are, apart from William's, most valued by her, just as Rebecca Seton and her sister Cecilia's will be in later years. Because these later relations with William's stepsisters are frequently sublimated in religious language and pious exhortations, the earlier letters to Eliza Sadler more clearly

<sup>59</sup>EBS to Julia, 20 December 1799, *ibid.*, 67.

<sup>60</sup>A groundbreaking essay by Carol Smith-Rosenberg explored the romantic language and intimate practices by women friends, usually married and separated by distance. Since her focus is almost exclusively on women living in the nineteenth century, I have not relied on her analysis but find its general thesis coincides with what we learn about Elizabeth. Confirmation of similar uses of language among literate women friends at the end of the eighteenth century is found in Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 75, and Norton *Liberty's Daughters*, 104-09. See Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 11 (1975):1-29. One insightful critique of this essay is found in Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: 1977), 183.

demonstrate the significance Elizabeth attaches to deep affectionate friendships with women. Elizabeth's letters to Sad during these spring-time years reveal more nakedly the intimate, affectionate, romantic dimensions of Elizabeth's friendships with women.

Elizabeth's relation with Eliza Sadler predates her marriage. More mature than Elizabeth and already married (although without children throughout her life), Sad and her husband Henry offer Elizabeth and William a chaperoned way to meet when courting.<sup>61</sup> That Eliza had a powerful influence on Elizabeth from early in their acquaintance was recognized at least by her sister Mary Post. Elizabeth reports to Sad how she was teased after Sad's friends relayed the impression that she was in "one continued scene of amusement" while in Europe. "It has several times been insinuated to me that in your absence you will lose that interest you once took in a little retired uninformed personage who possesses neither fashion nor fancy, but the idea has never given me a moment's pain, for when I received the first caresses of my Sad she knew as much of the world as she does now, and I dread no alienation from a heart that values candor and nature more than refinement and grace, where *they* are not to be found."<sup>62</sup>

The earliest correspondence of Elizabeth to Sad to which we have access leads to the conclusion that while they had a close friendship before Sad left for Europe, Elizabeth needs assurance that the love and attachment she feels for Sad is reciprocated and strong enough to survive distance and separation. Elizabeth's unmistakable relief when Sad strongly affirms her affection assuages Elizabeth's vulnerability. "Do you not think that after all the anxiety I have lately known on your account I kissed the letter and placed it my Bosom, which told me that you were *quietly* living among all the tumults which surround you. . . . You love me, and yet call me *dearest*. The longer I live the more I reflect and know how to value the realities of Friendship, the more precious that distinction becomes, and I look forward to the dear Hope that my Sweet Child will also enjoy it. You need not fear to lose me. No my Sad."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>A brief note to William suggests they met at the Sadler's somewhat regularly. "My dearest Will, —Mrs. Sadler is not going to the concert and wishes very much to see *US* there this evening. Do not be too late" (EAB/EBS to WMS, n. d., SEA, bk. 27, no. 66d). Emphasis in original.

<sup>62</sup>EBS to Sad, 1 August 1797, SEA book 17, no. 4, from Long Island. Emphasis in original.

<sup>63</sup>EBS to Sad, 11 August 1796, SEA, book 17, no. 2. Emphasis in original.

A letter the following June reflects a deeper confidence regarding Sad's affection. "My Precious Sad, . . . The mild peaceful flow of the river before our dwelling, always inspires me with ideas of you, and increases the melancholy regret which thoughts of absent friends inspire, but I have no friends to cause that regret, and no bosom to sigh for but yours, for I have none which calls forth the same kind of affection with yourself, none that I would unite with my William to increase the delight of my evening hours."<sup>64</sup>

The strongest indication of the esteem with which Elizabeth viewed Sad is a response to a letter from Sad, exchanged while the latter was still overseas.

You speak of me as independent of you; do you not know that there is not an hour of my life in which I do not want either the advice or soothing of friendship and I sacredly declare that you, *Eliza S.* are the only person to whom I could commit the guidance of my conduct in preference to the impulse of my own judgment; therefore, never again say that you are not necessary to me, for it is utterly impossible that any one else should fill that place in my estimation which affection and experience has assigned to you. I know that this declaration is unnecessary but my heart has so often made it, that I can not refuse myself the indulgence of expressing it.<sup>65</sup>

Elizabeth expresses her love and affection for Sad in a variety of tones: sometimes playful, others petulant at her long absence, still other longing for her physical presence. The numerous delays in Sad's return triggers an emotional roller coaster in Elizabeth.<sup>66</sup> Once Sad returns and their relation matures, Elizabeth expresses confidence in the stability of their friendship, perhaps due in part to her increasing absorption with her more complicated family circumstances by 1799.<sup>67</sup>

The romantic language in Elizabeth's letters to Sad leaves no doubt that the friendship between these two women was more than companionship or shared wifely concerns although, as is evident from their letters once Sad returns to New York City, these too are dimen-

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<sup>64</sup>EBS to Sad, 18 June 1797, SEA, book 17, no. 3.

<sup>65</sup>EBS to Sad, 1 August (This part added 10 August) 1797, SEA, book 17, no. 4, 1. For a woman who typically valued her own judgments and knew her own mind to state so starkly that she could love and trust another's judgment more than her own seems very significant. It raises the question whether this declaration may presage the complex nature of subsequent relations, especially with religiously affiliated men, in which Elizabeth struggles between submission, following another's advice, and trusting her own judgment.

<sup>66</sup>This is apparent in the contrasting tone of two letters. EBS to Sad, 18 June 1797, SEA, book 17, no. 3; EBS to Sad, 1 August (this part added 10 August) 1797, SEA book 17, no. 4.

<sup>67</sup>EBS to Sad, 9 September 1799, SEA book 17, no. 15.

sions of their relationship. What is more important for us to recognize today, however, is the ease with which women could express their deep feelings for another woman, in practice as well as in letters. In her strong, even passionate attachments to women throughout most of her life, from Sad, Julia, and Dué to Rebecca and Cecilia to Cecilia O'Conway and perhaps others of her sister/daughters, Elizabeth is once again a woman of her time.<sup>68</sup>

One way to assess the acceptability of intense, intimate, and openly affectionate relationships between a wife and her women friends is through William Magee's response to Elizabeth's relationships with the women closest to her, at least as we can infer this from Elizabeth's letters. As is clear from Will's input to her letters, it was not unusual for a husband to encourage his wife to invite a close woman friend when he would be absent. Moreover, he did not expect that the friend would leave upon his return.

A series of playful letters to Julia highlight a delicious sexual teasing on Elizabeth's part, urging Julia to give Will a kiss that Elizabeth can then multiply when he returns. "I charge you to send me a kiss by my husband—one, mind, no more, or you will be putting notions in the man's head. He will be with you next Thursday, I suppose, and then, next Saturday, I hope, with me who will make your one many, by all the rules of multiplication."<sup>69</sup>

Recent research on heretofore unexamined eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's diaries, journals, and letters reveals that at least among literate middle and upper-class women intense friendships between women which persisted most of their lives were quite common. Here too Elizabeth's pattern of relationships mirrors that of her peers.

### Pregnancy, Childbirth, Nursing, Mothering

The dominant experience of Elizabeth's married years centered around pregnancy, confinement for birth, nursing, and caring for babies and toddlers. In the less than ten years before the eventful trip to Italy, Elizabeth bore, nursed, and raised five children. She con-

<sup>68</sup>For confirmation of this, see Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 105-09; Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 168-75, 182-85. Cott also notes that religion and pious language are used in letters of intense friendship between women, 179-81, 169-70. This, of course, is the pattern that emerges in Elizabeth's correspondence with William's halfsisters Rebecca and then Cecilia.

<sup>69</sup>EBS to Julia, June 1801, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 90.

ceived during the first months after marriage and weaned the last just before leaving for Italy. No matter what perspective we use for examining Elizabeth as a woman of her time, none can be separated from her almost constant experience of mothering.

Pregnancy and nursing, a rather constant condition most of her married life, seem to bring her pleasure, at least in these early years. Bearing and raising children is a state she both takes for granted and seems to welcome, even with the problematic birth of Richard for which Sad likely was present.<sup>70</sup> As was considered appropriate, she used a code to speak of pregnancies; "Shadow" seems the most common one.<sup>71</sup> Confinement, several weeks of remaining "hidden" at home before and after each birth, did bring its own rewards, for family members usually took charge of the other siblings while the pregnant woman was assured comfort and good air—especially important during the summer months when the dreaded epidemics of yellow fever hit the city. For upper-class women, then, the weeks before childbirth offered a prolonged period of rest and leisure, usually in the company of a female relative or dear friend, most often one who did not have her own child responsibilities. Confinement was surely a welcome change for someone with several children. For someone like Elizabeth, with attentive dear friends, a caring husband, and a physician father and brother-in-law, this time meant freedom from the constant distractions of small children as well as servants/slaves to

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<sup>70</sup>Elizabeth's account to Julia a month after Richard's birth summarizes the situation.

The dear little son was for some hours thought past hope, and the Mother within one more pain of that rest she has so often longed for, but for which Heaven, I hope, for good purposes has again denied. My Father may truly said to have given the breath of life to my child, for when it neither breathed nor moved he went on his knees and placing his mouth to its lips breathed, or I may say, forcibly blew it into its lungs. And now the little soul is the most lovely, heathly [*sic*] being you ever saw (EBS to Julia, 20 August 1798, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 30).

This event, of course, is one that scars this year, effectively contributing to the end of Elizabeth's springtime. The trauma of Dick's birth, her subsequent willingness to offer God the life of the infant Kate for her father, and her presumption that baby Rebecca, hardly weaned when she left for Italy, had died while she was away, may signal more ambivalence about the later pregnancies.

<sup>71</sup>There are numerous examples scattered in her letters. In a quick note to her father about Kate's health, for example, Elizabeth adds a line after her signature, "the Shadow Animated, thanks" (EBS to Richard Bayley, n. d., SEA, book 27, 73). Her comment seems to suggest that the "Shadow" (fetus) has attained a different stage of development, apparently implying an ontological difference. This may well coincide with a distinction common at the time between "quickening" and "viability" (Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* [New York: c. 1964, reprint 1977], 52, 57).

attend to all her physical needs. The playful way Elizabeth badgers Sad to accompany her for the weeks preceding Dick's birth sounds more like an invitation to a vacation than childbirth.<sup>72</sup> She may well have confronted subsequent births differently, both because of the traumatic experience of Dick's but also due to her changed financial and family circumstances.

The concrete circumstances of Elizabeth's confinements, at least in the earlier births, underscores the class-based nature of her experience. Confinement and childbirth were quite different for impoverished women, worse again for slaves and indentured servants, and yet again for hired servants, many of whom were fired once their pregnancy was apparent, especially if unmarried or impregnated by a man in the household or other servant, regardless of the circumstances. Not surprisingly, women, impregnated cross-racially, whether black or white, were the most ostracized.<sup>73</sup>

Nursing her infants, a paradigmatic sensual experience, gives Elizabeth special pleasure, at least in these springtime years. The record of Elizabeth's experience with pregnancy, childbirth, confinement, and nursing coincides in almost all respects with the picture recent scholarship gives of women of her race and class. This includes rather frequent pregnancies and the desire to nurse their own chil-

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<sup>72</sup>Elizabeth's invitation is coupled with the opportunity to share their interest in J. J. Rousseau's *Emile*.

I have a dear little retirement to share with you, but not one prospect to expand the Soul. Nothing but shade and quiet, and is not that a great deal—and it will be *ours*.

My Wm. continues his determination of going to Baltimore. I cannot be left alone, and if Dear J. Jacques and you are my company I shall have a reproach to make myself I never felt before, that of being satisfied in his absence (EBS to Sad, 25 June 1799, SEA, book 17, no. 13). Emphasis in original.

Come while W. M. is away, and come when he is here, Oh, come, come, come come, I could say till I see you (EBS to Sad, 4 July 1799, SEA, book 17, no. 14).

<sup>73</sup>Class differences regarding "lying in," time to rest after delivery, are discussed by Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 83-84; that wealthier women used doctors for childbirth (*ibid.*, 79-80); that midwives continued to bear children for the urban poor (Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 123). D'Emilio and Freedman discuss problems with cross-racial relations but more in the South than North (*Intimate Matters*, 32-37, 42-43, 49-52).

In New York City, the Lying-In Hospital was opened in 1801 only for women who had no other alternative place or assistance for bearing children; Elizabeth's father, Doctor Richard Bayley was one of the founders. According to the *Citizens' Directory*, 41, this was formed in 1799, for "indigent pregnant women; and of affording them the necessary medical assistance during their confinement." This resource was for those "deprived of every domestic accommodation" (*ibid.*, 43-44).

dren.<sup>74</sup> Despite the belief that wealthy white women regularly hired wet nurses, often free black women or slaves, research reveals that, at least in the north during these years, every woman who could physically nurse did so with pride, finding deep emotional and sensual satisfaction in this experience. In fact, women who could not nurse lamented this loss greatly.<sup>75</sup> Elizabeth then was not unique in the enjoyment she gained from nursing her children.

So common was nursing that it was not unusual for some women to do this in some public areas, such as a church, thereby allowing them to attend services. Not all approved of this, nor is the social class of women who practiced this clear, but at least one contemporary public exchange reveals both that this pattern of nursing publicly was common and that at least some men found it inappropriate.<sup>76</sup>

Nursing had its inevitable underside as well, one well known to Elizabeth who was probably nursing five to eight years of her ten years of marriage. Although there were times she was not physically present to her nursing infant, overall the terms in which she describes it when she would prefer time with Sad lament eloquently her situation. Her plight is well known to nursing mothers: as long as her infant, here "little Dick," cannot digest other than breast milk, Elizabeth is housebound for the intervening months, dependent on friends able to travel to see her. "I am a bond woman and you are free—You must come to me, for little darling is not to be fed, and I am to be faithful to him till October."<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth's use of a bondage metaphor for herself does not seem to move her to question Mammy Huler's status as more than situational, as is Elizabeth's.<sup>78</sup> More plainly, she tells Julia, "I have but one nurse for my four children, and little Kate being still at the breast I can neither leave her nor take the others."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 90-92.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>A "friend to Females" signed the following, which appeared in the *Independent Mechanic*, 21 December 1811. He described breastfeeding in church as "an evil of such magnitude" and "indecent" because a woman will "expose her bare bosom to a gaping multitude of men; and this she is necessitated to do frequently to pacify her babe." A response from Sarah Touchstone, a woman with a babe, appeared a week later, December 28, 1811. "A gaping multitude of men, did he say? . . . If they came there to hear the word of God they would not be gaping at the mother's naked bosom." Both cited in *The New York City Artisan, 1789-1825: A Documentary History*, ed. Howard B. Rock (Albany: 1989), 64.

<sup>77</sup>EBS to Sad, n. d., SEA, book 17, no. 12.

<sup>78</sup>See note 94 below for discussion of whether William and Elizabeth owned slaves.

<sup>79</sup>EBS to Julia, June 1801, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 83.

Although upper-class women enjoyed their children, there is ample evidence—including from Elizabeth herself—that many sought to limit the number and/or frequency of pregnancies. To date there is little evidence about how widespread forms of birth control were. Although Quaker women, especially in Philadelphia, used special syringes purchased in apothecaries for controlling births,<sup>80</sup> most women in New York found breast-feeding their best but not always successful means of delaying pregnancy. Rather than follow the European custom of nursing for two full years, most upper-class northern women nursed from nine to eighteen months, with a year the norm.<sup>81</sup> At least with Kate, Elizabeth hoped that continuing to nurse her would postpone another pregnancy; she makes this very explicit in a letter to Julia. “Your little Kit is not weaned yet. To tell the truth I am afraid of the Shadows as soon as I give up nursing.”<sup>82</sup> While some women today may need to believe that Elizabeth and her contemporaries, who bore an average of eight live births per woman, rejoiced over each pregnancy,<sup>83</sup> it seems more accurate to say that many would have preferred fewer pregnancies or at least the opportunity to space them differently, but most likely eventually welcomed the children they bore, resigned “to their lot.”<sup>84</sup>

Elizabeth was rather forthright about childbirth, given the conventions of her time. That she says as much as she does about Dick’s

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<sup>80</sup>Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 232-34; see also D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 48.

<sup>81</sup>Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 91. Norton cites evidence that at least some husbands were supportive of limiting pregnancies, but even they expected their wives to carry the primary responsibility, especially through nursing.

<sup>82</sup>EBS to Julia, 27 October 1801, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 96.

<sup>83</sup>At the same time, because the infant and general mortality rates were high, the average household in 1790 consisted of 5.7 individuals. See Gordon, *Women’s Body*, 48.

<sup>84</sup>The perennial methods of induced abortion and infanticide were not unknown; contemporary obstetrical instruments included hooks for dismembering dead fetuses as well as forceps for assisting in live births. (Pictured and described in Kerber and De Hart, *Women’s America*, 26.) The instruments suggest the prevalence of prenatal and natal mortality but not information about its frequency. Available statistics suggest that both maternal and infant mortality was high, particularly among impoverished and poorly nourished women confined to the heart of the disease-ridden cities and that many children died before or during adolescence. Elizabeth’s own experience when she and Dick barely survived his birth and the frightening episode with little Will suggests that William and Elizabeth were fortunate that their five lived as long as they did. For an account of little Will’s sickness in EBS to Sad, 1 August (this added 15 August), 1797, SEA, book 17, no. 4.



birth indicates the trauma she experienced in birthing him.<sup>85</sup> The fear of dying in childbirth, while statistically less common than the keenness of this fear among women and their partners would indicate, is no less real—and corroborated often enough to fan the fear. Within Elizabeth and William's families there are sufficient examples of women dying during or soon after childbirth to make understandable the existential association of childbirth with dying. Linking the two meant that a woman was literally surrendering her life—or anticipating the very real possibility of dying—each time she gave birth. The depth of this trauma, spiritually as well as physically, likely influenced spiritualities, encouraging a willing surrender of loved ones from this life in anticipation of reunion with them in the next. Again, Elizabeth was a woman of her time.<sup>86</sup>

William was not unusual in being nearby during the actual deliveries. At least among upper-class folks who left letters and diaries of such events, many husbands hovered in the home during labor, even if they were not physically present for the birth itself. This may suggest prevalent fear about the risks—as well as pain—involved for their wives during delivery. It also implies men's concern about the trauma for their wives and the likelihood of a caring relationship.<sup>87</sup> The fact that William at least once finished a letter Elizabeth was writing by announcing a birth indicates his presence in the house, if not at the delivery. Interestingly, although there is ample evidence in contempo-

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<sup>85</sup>A month after Dick's birth, Elizabeth shares with Julia that among the reasons she has not written was "the loss of my fine eyes for some weeks from excessive pain occasioned by the severity of my pains in the birth of my son." She continues, "I was so terribly ill in my hours of sorrow that my poor Father could scarcely perform his office, though every exertion was necessary to save me" (20 August 1798, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 30). Less than a year and a half later, she is again pregnant but now carries the additional pressure of working with William in his attempts to save the failing business. "Ah, Julia dear, you little know . . . what the present state of your friend's mind is nor the paleness of her face, with pain in the back all day and in the side at night, neither of which I have been without these two months. But as I believe this to be entirely the consequence of the Shadow . . . the moment the little one is at the breast all will be forgot" (18 March 1800, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 73). See also Elizabeth's letter to Julia almost a month after Kate's birth (26 July 1800, *ibid.*, 74).

<sup>86</sup>Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 87-90, documents attitudes which echo Elizabeth's, both in anticipating eternal reunions with loved ones and in choosing early deaths for children to insure eternal presence at the risk of full earthly lives that risk sin and so loss of heaven and eternal reunions. See, for example, "Dear Remembrances," in Kelly, *Elizabeth Seton*, 346-47.

<sup>87</sup>Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 79. Although William was likely present for more than one birth, it is less clear that he was nearby for the most traumatic one, that of Dick, their third child. Given Elizabeth's insistence that Sad keep her company during her confinement because William would be traveling, it is possible he was not present for that difficult birth. (EBS to Sad, 25 June 1799, SEA, book 27, no. 13).

rary diaries and letters that husbands were commonly nearby during birth, there is yet no direct evidence that they were regularly present during the birth itself.<sup>88</sup> This makes even more intriguing the content of William's postscript on Elizabeth's unfinished letter to Julia in which he explains the letter's incompleteness by announcing the birth of Rebecca, their fifth and last child.<sup>89</sup> "Thus far, my very amiable little Friend, did our dear Eliza write last night at 11 o'clock and this morning at twelve I have the satisfaction to tell you she was safely delivered, of girl,—Great and Beautiful, equalled, but not excelled by any of our others, which is all I shall say of her at present and that the Mother is as well as she usually is on such occasions, *better* than would be expected, for we had neither *Doctor or anything of the kind*, till a quarter of an hour after the Young Lady made her first appearance."<sup>90</sup>

While this tells us that neither a doctor nor midwife attended the birth, at the same time it does not tell us whether William actually participated in the delivery or if there were women servants/slaves and/or a woman friend or relative to assist. Still, his note is tantalizing, for there is at least the implication that William may have helped deliver the child.<sup>91</sup>

As much as Elizabeth seemed to welcome her world closing upon the small but ever expanding family circle, she was keenly aware in anticipating Will's birth of inevitable changes children bring in the closest relationships.<sup>92</sup> Although more explicit about the effect of multiple children on her friendship with Sad, they are more likely to affect her relationship with William. Whether or not Elizabeth might have preferred to accompany him on various trips or evenings out, this was not feasible given social constraints on pregnant and nursing women, at least in higher social ranks and the physical demands of travel by coach. Moreover, as the children multiply, her letters describe fewer

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<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>EBS to Julia, 19 August 1802, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 101-02. Oddly enough, Code notes only that William finishes the letter to Julia the next day (20 August), announcing the birth of a girl. Given the content of William's note, one wonders why Code did not give the full text.

<sup>90</sup>WMS postscript to Julia, 20 August 1802, SEA, book 10, no. 46. Emphasis in original.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid. An amusing note: after commenting on the weather, William tells Julia that the "Old Lady . . . hopes to write to you again soon herself." While a term of affection, and likely how Elizabeth refers to herself, the "Old Lady" connotes someone carrying more responsibilities than her twenty-five years may find comfortable.

<sup>92</sup>Apprehension lingers, focused at times on the changes motherhood has wrought in Elizabeth since she last saw Sad. Acknowledging she had grown into the role of mother, one Sad was unaccustomed to seeing her in, she fears that her inadequacies will be more transparent to Sad than to herself. (EBS to Sad, 1 August 1797, SEA, book 17, no. 4.)

family scenes including William.<sup>93</sup> How to read his absences may not be clear, but that Elizabeth assumes virtually all responsibility for the children seems beyond question. At this stage of their marriage, it seems inconceivable that he might address her as his "little girl."

### Household Mistress

Clearly a woman of her class and race, Elizabeth presumes the presence of servants/slaves as part of her household.<sup>94</sup> Although the egalitarian rhetoric surrounding the revolution and colonial independence increased expectations for a better life among those previously denied, in reality the strong class divisions carried over from England were little changed. The rather rigid class structures, from continuing aristocracy through professional to the emerging mercantile to working class to "paupers" to slaves, remained largely unchanged by either rhetoric or newly-encouraged aspirations. One manifestation of this

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<sup>93</sup>For example, after Anna's birth we find this typical description, "At this moment William is playing 'rosy dimpled boy' [and other songs], all as fast as the violin can sound them in rotation." (EBS to Sad, 8 February 1796, SEA, book 17, no. 1). Two and a half years later, her comment about William's presence seems to imply it was not usual. "You should have heard from your Darlings and your friend three days ago but our W. M. S. has given us those last three days." (EBS to Sad, 9 September 1799, SEA, book 17, no. 15.) In fairness to him, problems with the business had already emerged.

<sup>94</sup>Although to date there is no hard evidence establishing that Elizabeth and William themselves owned slaves, neither is there evidence to the contrary. Indeed, except for a concern with educating black children in Emmitsburg—and even here it was likely religious education—to my knowledge there is no indication that Elizabeth finds slavery wrong. By contrast, there is evidence that her father and William's, her Uncle Bayley, and her maternal grandfather (for years, chaplain to "Negroes") all owned slaves at one time, making it more likely that "Mammy Huler," mentioned often and warmly in Elizabeth's letters and whom she attended when dying, was a long-term servant/slave. It is also likely that "Phoebe," who accompanies baby Rebecca to Mary Post's to assist with the baby's care during the Italian journey, Doctor Bayley's boatmen, and the "young Bayley" were also slaves. Evidence about her grandfather and uncle is in their wills. See Rose Marie Laverty, S. C., *Loom of Many Threads* (New York: 1958), "Appendix" no. 10, 244, and no. 16, 248-249 respectively. The "Young Bayley" who prepares her father, Doctor Richard Bayley, for burial—not to be confused with Joseph Bayley, her father's young physician associate but no relative—was likely her father's personal slave. We learn he has been "one of his [her father's] family for fourteen years and to whom he was excessively attached" (EBS to Julia, 5 September 1801, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 92). Even the language Elizabeth used (likely unconsciously) to describe the problems surrounding her father's burial because he died of yellow fever makes obvious that "young Bayley" and the boatmen are different from the "people." "[W]e thought of taking him [her father's body] in his barge to Richmond [Staten Island] which could go within half a mile of the church yard, where he was at last laid, by young Bayley and his [her father's] faithful boatmen, the sexton nor none of the people daring to approach." (ibid., 93; emphasis added). Code identifies "Young Bayley," erroneously, I believe, as "Joseph Bayley" (ibid., 92 n. 1). While this may make Elizabeth look cleaner on the question of owning slaves, it confuses Joseph Bayley, a physician, and Young Bayley, an adult male with no first name who clearly carries the last name of his master, to whom he has belonged for fourteen years. On my reading there is evidence that at least Elizabeth's father owned a slave, an arrangement with which she was not only familiar but apparently comfortable. My best guess is that "Mammy Huler" was also a slave.

was the retention of servants/slaves, commonly called "Helps,"<sup>95</sup> as a sign of a family's wealth and social position. More precisely, black servants were preferred by the wealthier in contrast to poor white women and men who usually were hired on a daily basis by those not much better off than those they hired.<sup>96</sup>

Often Elizabeth presents herself working alongside the servants/slaves and/or the children's nurse. A quite different glimpse of Elizabeth's attitude toward servants/slaves emerges when she commiserates with Julia about the unfortunate changes in the manner servants view their work. The result, Elizabeth reports, is the reversal of what should be the case. Rather than the mistress's peace of mind being paramount, she complains, the masters are increasingly dependent on the whims of their servants/slaves. "It is a melancholy reflection, and on [*sic*] one can make it oftener than I do, that our peace and pleasure should so much depend on hirelings. . . . Oh, Julia, how happy must have been the former days of simplicity and ease, when cooks and waiters had their proper rank in existence and had not the power of overturning whole families and tormenting us poor little ladies until life is almost a burden."<sup>97</sup> Both her tone and content here belie a blindspot about class differences and servants/slaves, a fairly common attitude among many, but not all, women of her race and class.<sup>98</sup>

Supervising household tasks and those servants/slaves performing most of them was a major responsibility of upper-class wives; their primary responsibilities included smooth running of a home and rearing children, including their moral and religious formation. Class distinctions were most obvious in this arena, for all but the wealthiest women had to do all the household chores themselves while trying to

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<sup>95</sup>Stansell, *City Women*, 12.

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup>EBS to Julia, 20 February 1799, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 51. This passage, in which I assume Elizabeth is serious, conveys an attitude redolent of the arrogance of a wealthy woman "expecting" her life to be made easier by servants/slaves not entitled to setting their own priorities. Because it reveals clearly an upper-class consciousness, I quote it at length.

<sup>98</sup>The most notable exceptions were Quakers, who were central in trying to end slavery in New York City for years; indeed, throughout Elizabeth's living in New York there were various efforts to end slavery. At the same time, the number of slaves did not decline even though there was an increase in free blacks. In 1790 and 1800, slaves numbered 2,369 and 2,868 respectively, while free blacks moved from 1,101 to 3,499 in the same ten year period. One source makes clear how long it took to eliminate slavery in New York City: "By a law of 1817 slaves born before July 4, 1799, were to be free after July 3, 1827. But not till 1841 did slavery as an institution cease forever in New York" (Pomerantz, *American City*, 224).

rear children. For those women without healthy, employed husbands, working for money to support the family was an added burden, for they were still responsible for all household chores. How women fared economically depended almost exclusively on their economic class; then as now, this was largely determined by the economic status of their husbands. Even without a husband, or with one bringing in inadequate funds, women's options for work still depended on the economic class in which they had been raised and had been living since marriage. For example, widows like Elizabeth, with some education, sufficiently large house, and respectability, could teach, take in boarders, or open a small shop. Widows whose husbands had been merchants, whether in shops or in stalls at the Fly Market, the central shopping area, usually were granted permission by the City Council to take over their husband's business.<sup>99</sup> Some served as temporary baby nurses for wealthy women recovering from childbirth. Women with fewer skills resorted to taking in laundry or peddling goods in neighborhoods; the latter job was looked down upon and so usually fell to free black women.<sup>100</sup> Prostitution was commonly the only recourse for women abandoned or with sullied reputations.<sup>101</sup> All others were forced to depend on charity, a group like the Society for Poor Widows with Children if they were fortunate and "deserving," for this option at least allowed them to keep their family together, or, if all else failed, the almshouse, at least for the cruel winters.

### Benevolent Activity and Social Problems

Elizabeth's involvement with the Society for Poor Widows with Small Children was once again in keeping with her role. Biographers who present her as unique miss the most important point: one role of a lady, a responsibility of genteel upper-class women prominent in society, whether married or single, was benevolent activity. Aligning with other ladies to alleviate the suffering of the "deserving poor" was a duty of women whose husbands or fathers could afford sufficient household help (that is, slaves, indentured or salaried servants), thereby

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<sup>99</sup>MCCCNy, 29 October 1798, 11: 476 and 5 November 1798, 2: 477. Each contains an example of a widow requesting and receiving permission to continue operating their former husbands' butcher stalls in the Fly Market.

<sup>100</sup>Stansell, *City Women*, 12.

<sup>101</sup>Some estimate between 1,200 and 7,000 prostitutes on the city streets early in the nineteenth century.

affording their wives and/or daughters the leisure and influence needed to raise money, organize activities, and establish institutions to meet concrete needs of the impoverished and other societal outcasts.

The Society for Poor Widows with Small Children was initiated by the indefatigable and resourceful Isabella Graham.<sup>102</sup> A large number of the most prominent ladies from several different religious affiliations gathered at Graham's home to form the Society, usually acknowledged as the first benevolent society organized and run by women in the new nation. Similar organizations were soon founded, some involving the same women, to address the needs of orphans, women and children in the almshouse, education of children from impoverished families, prostitutes, prisoners, etc. Quite different from Elizabeth's short-lived participation, many women remained committed to the organization and at least one of its offspring for many years. Eliza Sadler provides one example, attested to by the *Minutes* of the New York City Council. In 1819 the Council awarded her \$500 as treasurer of the Society for the Promotion of Industry, organized to assist widows acquire income-producing skills so they could become economically independent.<sup>103</sup>

The Constitution and Board Report of 1800 poignantly describes the situation of widows in society, a characterization more likely to evoke pity than a sense of injustice.

Widow is a word of sorrow, in the best of circumstances: but a Widow, left poor, destitute, friendless, surrounded with a number of small Children shivering with cold, pale with want, looking in her face with eyes pleading for bread which she has not to give, nor any probable prospect of procuring—her situation is neither to be described nor conceived! Many such scenes were witnessed the last winter; and though none

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<sup>102</sup>Most biographies on Elizabeth refer to Isabella Graham, but in their concern to emphasize Elizabeth's early proclivity for saintliness, they may understate the importance of other women. In the case of the Society for Poor Widows and their Children, there is no question that Isabella Graham was the founder and director for years; in the annual reports I have examined to date, 1799 and 1800, there is no evidence that Elizabeth was ever treasurer of the group, as Melville claims (*Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 62). Information about the founding of the widows' society from the perspective of Isabella Graham is in the edition of her memoirs, writings published by her daughter, Joanna Graham Bethune, an important figure in benevolent activity in her own right (*The Power of Faith Exemplified in the Life and Writings of the late Mrs. Isabella [Marshall] Graham*, New Edition, [New York: 1843], 143-45, 149-50, 166-69). Melville notes that in 1816, Eliza Sadler sent Elizabeth a copy of this book, published that year by her daughter, Mrs. Bethune (Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 392-93, n. 53).

<sup>103</sup>MCCCN, January 1819, 10: , 181.

could restore the *Father* and *Husband*, the hearts of the mourners were soothed by the Managers, while they dispensed the relief provided them, by their *Father* and their *Husband*, GOD.<sup>104</sup>

In the first years, Elizabeth was elected a “Manager.”<sup>105</sup> This role, specifically spelled out in the Constitutions of the Society, was similar to a social worker’s today: visit widows applying for assistance, take what we would call a case history, assist the widow to assess her needs, place younger children in charity schools organized and funded by wealthy men and/or churches, and apprentice older children—boys to artisans, merchants, etc.; girls in household service. The manager visited regularly, ascertaining changes in needs, seeking home work for widows (often sewing shirts subsequently sold by the Society), and delivering the “necessities” (for example, wood, cooking oil, flour) rather than money. The language and tone of the Constitutions are explicit: a key role of the manager was assessing the “character and circumstances” of the widows because “immorality excludes from the patronage of the Society.”<sup>106</sup> In addition to supplying needed goods, provided the widow agreed to the conditions regarding her children, part of the manager’s role was instructive.<sup>107</sup> During the Society’s first months, the number of widows assisted was impressive: 152 with 420 children under twelve.<sup>108</sup>

Reports from the managers make clear that most widows were glad to forego assistance when they were able to survive on their own, more likely in the early summer months than the later ones, when the dreaded yellow fever hit, or in winter, when the cold increased their

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<sup>104</sup>*Constitution of the Ladies Society Established in New-York, for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children*, 2nd. ed. (New York: 1800), 16. Emphasis in original.

<sup>105</sup>*Constitution*, 1799 list of Managers, 14; *Constitution*, 1800, 22. Given what awaits Elizabeth in the future, it seems especially significant that she was elected a manager by members of the Society, for this gave her direct experience with widows with small children living in destitute poverty. In this role she met widows without any support networks, influential friends, opportunities for employment, or place to turn.

<sup>106</sup>*Constitution* 1799, 8. The Society’s constitutions do not indicate whether slave or free black women, prostitutes, or immigrants from the Dominican Republic (numerous at this time) were accepted as “poor widows.” With the large influx during these years—as we know too from Elizabeth’s accounts of the plague-ridden Irish immigrants with whom her father worked—it is likely that the Society worked with some immigrant widows but whether any of their clientele were women of color is less clear.

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

need for assistance, especially wood.<sup>109</sup> The different options open to the members of the Society and the "poor widows" during the deadly summer months most dramatically illustrate the social-economic class discrepancies.

Elizabeth's correspondence repeatedly refers to the necessity of being out of the city in the late summer. By contrast, the Society's Board reports, "Such [poor] widows as had no friends in the country, under whose roof they might, for a time, seek shelter, were shut up to the only relief within their power, even to that *Society*. . . . Some, with the means of escape, while the pestilence, mowing down Fathers and Husbands, who were engaged in securing the property of the opulent, multiplied the number of the miserable."<sup>110</sup>

The inequity of the options available to different classes is reflected, at least covertly, in the report of the Joint Health Commission on which Doctor Bayley served. Appointed by the City Council to investigate causes of the pestilence, they advocated purchasing sufficient tents to allow at least 5,000 destitute and desperate people to move outside the plague-infested inner city.<sup>111</sup>

Yellow fever ran rampant in the germ-ridden, steaming air and filthy streets filled with human and animal waste as well as rotting remains of slaughtered livestock and the ever-multiplying mosquitoes, not yet generally recognized as carriers of the plague. Statistics from the New York City Common Council Minutes make this clear. Whereas in 1795 yellow fever killed 732, mostly poor Irish immi-

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<sup>109</sup>The "Report of the Board of Direction for April 1800" expresses graphically the dilemma impoverished women faced and, at the same time, conveys the flavor of the Society.

[D]uring the Months of May, June and July, except in cases of sickness, there were no applications; work being plenty, and little fire necessary, they supported themselves by their industry: a certain proof, that they would rather eat their own bread, hardly earned, than that of others with idleness.

But again the pestilence evacuated the city; again every source of industry was dried up; even the streams of benevolence from the country failed. Those storehouses, from which relief was issued to thousands in former calamities, now disappointed their hopes; and those spared by the pestilence were ready to perish by famine. . . . Four of the Society's board, at the risk of their lives, remained in the city, steady in the exercise of their office.

Besides giving largely from their own pockets and pantries, they expended three hundred and fifty dollars (*Constitution*, 1800, 14, 15).

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*, 15. Emphasis in original.

<sup>111</sup>MCCCNy, 21 January 1799, 2: 498.



grants, in 1798 there were 2,086 victims, including twenty doctors.<sup>112</sup>

Elizabeth likely found herself comfortable with the aims of the Society's benevolent work. For most, this activity was motivated more by religious concerns than social ones. The involvement of many was often a direct response to the request of their ministers to help the less fortunate. Not surprisingly, given the ladies' class status and the prevalent belief that wealth was a blessing from God, their activity was fundamentally ameliorative. They were more concerned with meeting the immediate needs of sick and destitute widows than examining and changing the structural causes of poverty. Their approach was conservative in the literal sense; they did not seek to change the institutions and attitudes that perpetuated inequities of class and race.<sup>113</sup>

Much of the impetus for their benevolence came from the socially accepted view that they were fulfilling their duty as women of their class. As a result, they received generous support from men, their donors, but most notably from the City Council. In effect, then, by fulfilling the public political role appropriate to women of their class and race, their charity work did not threaten or challenge "women's" (that is, ladies) proper role. By working within the societal norms and expectations for genteel women, they earned political leverage with men wielding power without challenging the men or their power.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>Again, the report of the Society for Poor Widows with Children describes the complex situation.

Before the next general meeting . . . the yellow fever had so increased the number and misfortunes of Widows, that none but eye-witnesses could have imagined the sufferings of many respectable, industrious women, who never thought to ask bread of any but of God. House-rents were going on, while every kind of industry was at a stand [*sic*]. Though provision was made for such as remained in the City, many fled with precipitation, leaving every thing in their houses, and, on their return, found nothing remaining but naked walls.

No provision made for the winter—the landlords, many of whom were nearly as poor as their tenants, clamorous for their rent—complaint of the want of employment universal—the Society determined that for this season the whole of their own donations should be expended on necessaries, and as much of the Gentleman's as should be requisite to purchase linen, checks, etc. for the purpose of furnishing the Widows with work (*Constitution*, 1799, 12-13).

The disastrous extent of the epidemic is reflected in the City Council's decision not to collect taxes during the height of yellow fever, but as a result they required a loan to pay the salaries of employees. (*MCCCN*, 5 November 1798, 2:, 477)

<sup>113</sup>Stansell, *City of Women*, 31-33.

<sup>114</sup>Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: 1990), 39, 73-74.

There is no reason to assume Elizabeth chafed under this arrangement. Indeed, her behavior later in life suggests that she learned this lesson well through the strategies used by the Society for Poor Widows and was herself most comfortable using—and perhaps stretching slightly—social expectations for “ladies” rather than challenging those norms openly, radically. As Mother Seton, at times Elizabeth seeks to resolve differences with the budding community’s clergy-superiors by appealing for intervention by higher male authority—Bishop John Carroll, for example—rather than directly challenge the priest-superiors herself. Although not all women so easily accepted the confinements of their role, there is no question that the Society for Poor Widows in New York politics and Elizabeth later amidst ecclesial power chose strategies that seemed to fit their personal histories, likely their personalities, and at least their short-range aims. Her spiritual daughters today may find this heritage more confining than Elizabeth seemed to.

## 2. The Crumbling of Elizabeth’s World 1798-1803

The characteristics of these springtime years most at odds with later ones lay in Elizabeth’s orientation toward the world. This includes her attitude towards the cosmos: nature surrounding her in plants, birds, fruit; her experience as woman, wife, and mother; and relationships, especially with her husband and children but also with cherished friends and extended family. Each of these areas contribute to the happiness and tranquility that dominate Elizabeth’s experience during these years. Her letters make clear that during these years her responses are strongly sensual and physical. The language she uses supports this reading. She is openly emotional: her feelings range from profound tenderness to light-hearted humor to frustration at separation or distance from loved ones to gripping fear about her child’s health. Many aspects of nature—wild flowers, a sunset, a bird’s song—evoke physical delight. Loved ones, especially William, Sad, her father, and then her children, know her warm, deep, abiding affection, shared physically to give meaning to her verbal expressions. Elizabeth presents herself as fully embodied, rooted religiously, spiritually in this world. In letters from these years, there is little evidence of the spiritualizing and religious sublimation, the other-worldliness so prevalent in Elizabeth’s responses to those she loves and what

brings her pleasure in subsequent periods of her life.

It is not that Elizabeth is without a heightened spirituality in these early years, but it now has multiple sources, including her embodied responses to the Scriptures, prayers, and songs. Nor is it that at other times she fails to respond to nature, friends, love. But her attitude and valuations shift, lessening the sensual, acutely physical enjoyment characteristic of these years. By contrast, in later periods she seems to reject or at least apologize for her earlier responses to worldly pleasures, passionate relationships, and even a full lifetime as important portents of God *in themselves*, as avenues to eternity. These springtime years, however, are not without an underside.

An undercurrent carrying a quite disparate orientation toward the value of living and loving in the world occasionally pushes through the more dominant one described above: sober, fearful, anxious moments come to the surface. One fear recurs at several points: the loss of what one loves. Given the prevalence of sickness and other dangers, one cannot trust that loved ones will always be physically present or enjoy long-lasting lives. Not surprisingly, this fear triggers caution about depending on the presence of those loved and often a fear of loving too much during life. At times this fear leads to a religious corollary: if one loves too much here, one could lose God and Heaven.<sup>115</sup>

Fears of losing loved ones and the even greater fear of missing reunion in heaven were not unknown to Elizabeth's contemporaries. At least one other woman's situation paralleled her own in many ways, for both had lost a younger sibling very early in life, an event which colored their responses for the remainder of their lives.<sup>116</sup> Their frequent confrontation with death—their own and those most dear—made many women keenly aware that who and what one loved in this life could suddenly be taken away. Only heaven, offering permanent assurance of reunion, rendered the risks of loving attractive.

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<sup>115</sup>While this particular theme reoccurs several times in letters from this period, Elizabeth states it very clearly in "Dear Remembrances." The risk of citing a passage from this piece, of course, is that it most likely reports her earlier concerns through the mood and memory she was living at the time she wrote it, about 1814. The following passage does epitomize well, however, this attitude which surfaced even during the springtime years. I begin with a line already integrated into the text, to dramatize the juxtaposition of feelings Elizabeth expresses, "my own home at 20—the world—that and heaven too, quite impossible! So every moment clouded with that fear My God if I enjoy this, I lose you—yet no true thought of who I would lose, rather fear of hell and shut out from heaven" ("Dear Remembrances" in Kelly, *Elizabeth Seton*, 346-47).

<sup>116</sup>The account of Sarah Ripley Stearns is cited in Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: 1975, reprint 1979), 129-34.

This context enables us to understand a primal concern Elizabeth has for her children, evident even before her religious awakening under Henry Hobart but one which comes more to the fore in later years. The fear of losing eternal reunion with her children leads to the conclusion that it is better for them to die early while still innocent, so they will surely be saved, than for them to live longer and risk losing God, heaven, and eternal reunion through sin. Even in these early years, when she is most at ease living embodied in the world with the consequent rewards of loving relationships and profound sensual pleasures, Elizabeth at times admits that she would rather "offer her children up," to have them die while innocent, than risk their growing to maturity and losing the assurance of salvation/eternity with God, herself, and one another.

This sober, sometimes melancholy undercurrent lies largely dormant throughout the springtime years, surfacing periodically as if to remind Elizabeth (and us) that these years—dominated by happiness, immersion in the world, and tranquility—are the exception in her life. While any one of the traumatic events of 1798 might well have brought this undercurrent to the fore, once the tragedies start tumbling rapidly into her life, there is little possibility that she could escape it.

At first, her world began to fall apart by pieces: William Senior's death, little Dick's traumatic birth, William Magee's failing business, bankruptcy bringing dramatic changes in their financial resources and those of his siblings, William's debilitating sickness, the yellow fever death of her own father—each of these was a major trauma. Although her world began falling apart brick by brick, suddenly it crumbled. Literally the world she and William had so carefully and lovingly constructed came crashing down upon them, in effect burying them and their ability to see alternatives clearly. This leads, all too quickly yet none too soon, to their decision to go to Italy as a last desperate attempt to improve William's health. Their departure, however, left in its wake loose, even ragged ends, unfinished business at every level: parental, familial, financial, friendship, business.

Ragged ends, left so abruptly; relations torn from their context; responsibilities unfinished; problems unacknowledged, unaddressed, dangling.

The complications of the failing family business and encroaching sickness have serious financial implications for the extended Seton family while threatening the security of the home and nuclear family so important to Elizabeth. There is little evidence William has the business prowess, intelligence, stamina, or established influence to handle crises, even apart from his sickness and grief for his father. Compounding this, William Senior left no will. We must assume, then, that the business is the source of Seton wealth as well as all the children's inheritance.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, Elizabeth offers clues that there is significant concern about William's handling of the business, especially as the scope of the impending crisis becomes clearer.<sup>118</sup> Three times, she tells us, William rejected offers of money, presumably to buy or bolster the business until the shaky time passed.<sup>119</sup>

Elizabeth acknowledges William's "distress of mind" and fears, admitting that at least at times he is incapable of acting.<sup>120</sup> Even more to the point, William is not able to handle the voluminous correspondence—whether because of the stress, sickness, grief, his lack of experience with this side of the business, or a more fundamental inadequacy she does not tell us. His inability here, however, prompts Elizabeth to take on herself the awesome task.<sup>121</sup> One must wonder, though, why she does not insist that others involved in the business take over, particularly if William's incapacity at this crucial point for the survival of the business is obvious to her. One explanation legitimately drawn from available primary materials is that neither Eliza-

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<sup>117</sup>Elizabeth's comment to Julia bears this out. "What is to become of his [William's] father's family Heaven only knows, for his estate has the first claims, as he was the principal partner" (EBS to Julia, 3 January 1800, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 69-70).

<sup>118</sup>EBS to Julia 19 December 1798, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 44-45., "My poor William is indeed to be pitied and has a dreadful struggle with them [his brothers and sisters] all. How he will get through it I know not." See also a letter to Rebecca in Alexandria, a fairly early statement to her sister-in-law about William's business crisis. "James has been almost crazy but on examination finds less cause of apprehension than he imagined" (EBS to Rebecca Seton [hereinafter RS], 23 December 1799, SEA, book 21, no. 1. All letters to Rebecca from transcript only).

<sup>119</sup>EBS to Julia 3 January 1800, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 70.

<sup>120</sup>For example, EBS to Julia, 3 January 1800, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 69. See also, EBS to RS, n. d., SEA, book 21, no. 19: "Willy is all aback about something. We are all shortly to go to the Black River and I dare not talk of money."

<sup>121</sup>EBS to Julia, 18 March 1800, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 71-72; EBS to RS, 20 March 1800, SEA, book 21, nn. 23-26, which describes the task of writing she has undertaken for William in more detail.

beth nor William fully understand the scope of the crisis. At the same time, one can only imagine the worry and frustration of other family members, particularly William Magee's siblings from his father's first marriage, his peers. Not only is their future financial security dependent on the survival of the family business, but they surely recognize that the future financial well-being of their much younger stepsiblings has serious implications for them. Following this line of thought makes one pause, suspicious of Elizabeth's reading of James Seton.<sup>122</sup> How much of his apparent pulling out of the floundering business, about which she appears so resentful, is due to his frustration at the way William and Elizabeth are handling things? Do the multiple burdens Elizabeth is carrying, in part because of William's sickness and/or ineptness, lead her to lose perspective? Are her fear, exhaustion, overwork causing her to read others' reactions from her anger and self-pity: anger that her happiness, well-being, and that of her nuclear family are threatened in ways that William's siblings', and her sister's, are not, and self-pity that no one else seems to understand things as she and William do?

Other questions emerge from these. Do William and Elizabeth initially underestimate the crisis? Do they fail to see the implications, not only for themselves but for the two sets of Seton children? Do William and Elizabeth fully understand the implications for his older siblings who, in light of William's bankruptcy and sickness, will have to assume responsibility for their stepsiblings, without their own or their younger siblings inheritance? Is William, by Elizabeth's own admission, so paralyzed by grief and remorse over his father's death that he is profoundly incapable of making appropriate decisions but yet unwilling to allow others to take over?

### *Italy Decision*

It is in this context that one must ask about her/their decision to travel to Italy at this crucial time. There are, it seems, some family and friends opposed to their decision to embark on a sea voyage for William's health.<sup>123</sup> How realistic is it to believe William may recover

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<sup>122</sup>"James has bought a handsome three story house in Greenwich Street, so thank Heavens we are not all sinking" (EBS to RS, 5 February 1800, SEA, book 21, nn. 23-26).

<sup>123</sup>"Seton has had new and severe suffering since I saw you. All say it is presumption and next to madness to undertake our voyage, but you know we reason differently" (EBS to Sad September 1803, SEA, book 18 no. 28).

on the trip? Her assessment of his health just as they embark raises serious questions about the wisdom of the trip, even for William's sake. She comments to Julia, "My Seton's decline is so rapid that there can be no hope of his recovery, in the view of mortal hopes."<sup>124</sup> Given this assessment is she perhaps hoping William may be more fully converted religiously if dying privately, away from family and friends? Is the trip responding to a need Elizabeth has as well as meeting her concern for William?

A number of questions present themselves about this decision, but without adequate information from Elizabeth or corroborating data from her family or friends it is difficult to assess the source or credibility of the opposition they faced. That many others will be dramatically affected by their decision is certain; whether Elizabeth and William can see this as clearly as others we do not know. There can be no doubt that this is a critical decision, not only for Elizabeth, William, and their children, but also for all those affected, first by the bankruptcy of the business and then by their decision to depart for an extended period. For one thing, their decision means that friends and family must care for their four youngest children and, in addition, assume responsibility for the second generation sired by William Senior and work out complicated financial strains.

A series of additional questions arise: why take Anna, at only eight years old? Apart from the reasons Elizabeth offers Sad, are other factors motivating Elizabeth here?<sup>125</sup> How fair is the trip to her children, all of them—Anna for taking her, and the others, aged seven to the quickly weaned sickly infant Rebecca, for leaving them; in effect to "abandon" them for what turns out to be nine months but might

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<sup>124</sup>EBS to Julia 1 October 1803, in Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 109.

<sup>125</sup>"Do you like the plan of our dear Anna going with us. Tho' I know you say she should not be parted from me, and that she is so young the voyage will have its use to her in many ways and probably will be strongly remembered by her thro' life. You know that I go fearless for you know where and how strong is my trust." (EBS to Sad, [likely September] 1803, SEA, book 18, no. 27. From transcript.)

have been considerably longer had William recovered?<sup>126</sup> Since those with responsibility for her children have to inform them of their father's death, this likely increases the emotional bonds developed in her absence. Upon her return does Elizabeth insure that the children maintain these emotional ties with their surrogate parents while she is emotionally devastated? Does she realize that her subsequent alienation from family and friends, complicated by her decision to move to Baltimore within a few years after her return from Italy, will tear the children from those who comforted them during the traumatic loss of their father and the long absence of their mother?

In short, is the decision to go to Italy a responsible one? Is Elizabeth simply accompanying her ailing husband who may have been determined to go with or without her? Is her decision repeating the pattern of her father, of disappearing from his children and responsibilities to them when overwhelmed? Is her determination to go to Italy driven by a need to escape the hard realities at home?

### *Afterward*

One thing is very clear: the decision to go to Italy is a dramatic turning point in Elizabeth's life. A critical act, it creates a radical rupture with the world and relations she had known until then. This event tears apart, beyond repair, the fabric of the life she had woven to that time. It fractures her life, irreparably. Moreover, because it fractures hers, it does the same to the lives of her small children. The rupture created by the journey to Italy is so complete that, upon her return in June 1804, Elizabeth can not move back into the world she had left the previous October. As a result, neither can her children,

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<sup>126</sup>Elizabeth tells us that her sister Mary took baby Rebecca, accompanied by Phoebe, a servant/slave to assist her, and that the elder Rebecca Seton and Eliza [Sadler] cared for the others. Given Rebecca's terminal sickness while Elizabeth was away, it seems likely that Eliza and Henry Sadler assumed major responsibility for the other three Seton children, aged seven to three. Melville claims that it is Eliza Maitland with Rebecca Seton who took responsibility for the three middle Seton children when their parents journeyed to Italy (Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 95). I suspect that Eliza Sadler assumed this responsibility because Eliza Maitland was, as we know from Elizabeth, in straits with her own numerous children. Moreover, Rebecca Seton's illness worsened to the point that she was dying when Elizabeth returned the following June. A letter from Elizabeth to Sad shortly before their departure supports this reading. "Dear, dear Eliza, my heart trembles within me, and I can only say take my darlings often in your arms, and do not let the remembrance of anything I have ever done that has vexed you come twice to your thoughts" (EBS to Eliza Sadler, Sept. 1803, SEA, book 18, no. 28. From transcript). Laverty in *Loom* reaches the same conclusion I do, but does not give textual evidence supporting it.



and yet the now alien world is the very one they inhabited during her absence. Nor is the Elizabeth who returns the same person who embarked nine months earlier. In sum, no part of her life remains the same once she returns from Italy. The decision to go to Italy when she did is indeed the pivotal one of her—and her children's—life; it is, quite simply, the linchpin upon which everything else before and after turns.